National Bulletin: 300-14-XX

Subject: LTP - Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Ranking Pools and Priority Resource

Concerns, and Revised Timeline for Contract Obligations

Action Required By: February 4, 2014

Purpose. To direct State Conservationists to review and make needed adjustments to ranking pools and priority resource concerns to facilitate the evaluation and ranking of CSP 2014-1 applications and to provide information to State and field office employees on the revised timeline and deadlines for obligating 2014-1 CSP funds.

Expiration Date. September 30, 2014

Background.

Ranking Pools and Priority Resource Concerns:

To implement CSP continuous signup, State Conservationists established ranking pools and identified priority resource concerns. Based on their evaluation of previous ranking period outcomes, State Conservationists may need to review and make adjustments to ranking pool boundaries and priority resource concerns.

Revised Timeline for Contract Obligations:

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) apportioned NRCS with fiscal year (FY) 2014 CSP funds in accordance with the continuing resolution (CR) passed in October 2013. As a result, CSP applications received by February 7, 2014, will be evaluated and considered for obligation by the established deadlines.

Explanation.

Ranking Pools and Priority Resource Concerns:

DIST: TO BE COMPLETED

By close of business on February 4, 2014, the State Conservationist, with advice from the State Technical Committee and local working groups, must take the following actions to facilitate the evaluation and ranking of 2014-1 CSP applications:

- Review the existing State's ranking pools utilized during the previous CSP ranking period and, if needed, modify existing boundaries or priority resource concerns to better reflect the unique challenges of managing and addressing similar resource concerns.
- 2) Socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers or ranchers ranking pools may be adjusted to better accommodate the ranking of applicants for these acreage allocations. Program access for these producers may be established statewide or within ranking pool boundaries. States utilizing a statewide ranking pool for socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers or ranchers need to ensure they select an appropriate number of priority resource concerns. A broader range of resource concerns should enable applicants to be more effectively evaluated across a diverse State.
- 3) Review the current priority resource concerns and modify as needed to ensure that not less than three or more than five priority resource concerns are selected for ranking pools. Priority resource concerns will be identified for agricultural land and NIPF.
- 4) Quality assurance in the State is required to ensure that all State subaccounts are in "released" status by February 4, 2014. States can use the "Account Type" summary report from the "Report" tab in ProTracts to identify subaccounts still in draft status.

Note: Established software controls require subaccounts to be released by the end of the signup period to ensure all applicants are evaluated consistently. States that do not follow the guidance in this bulletin will not be able to access the Conservation Measurement Tool (CMT) to evaluate and rank 2014-1 and will have to contact the CSP Team through their State Conservationist.

5) States will update Web sites with revised information.

Note: The State's ability to make changes and release the accounts ends with the closing of the 2014-1 application period on February 7. Therefore, NHQ will be conducting quality assurance to identify States that have subaccounts in draft status prior to the deadline.

Revised Timeline for Contract Obligations:

The revised target dates for processing applications in the CMT, ranking applications, conducting onsite field verifications, developing stewardship plans and contract documents, and obligating funds have been established for FY 2014.

Actions need to be completed in accordance with the following timeline:

Action	Date
Ranking Period 2014-1 cutoff date for accepting applications	February 7, 2014
Complete application evaluations and resource inventory in CMT, select applications for funding, and set applications to preapproved status in ProTracts	March 21, 2014
Complete onsite field verifications, develop stewardship plans, and complete initial fund obligations	May 9, 2014
Final obligation deadline for reallocated acres	June 13, 2014
Note: This schedule applies to all existing CSP, CCPI, and CCPI/MR	RBI projects.

Once acres and funds are provided, States will preapprove the highest-ranked applications while

remaining within the State acreage and available financial assistance fund allocations.

Preapproval letters will be generated through ProTracts and sent to preapproved applicants to schedule field verification appointments. States will document accurate onsite field verification findings and proceed with conservation stewardship planning, contract development, and contract obligation. When onsite findings are inaccurate, notification letters will be sent to participants listing the appropriate actions per policy.

Additional allocations of acres and financial assistance will be made at intervals throughout the obligation process. National Headquarters will continually analyze available acres and funds and periodically determine what redistribution is needed to meet program goals.

States are encouraged to closely monitor applications with eligibility and vendor issues, which can be difficult and time consuming to resolve. Applicants should be reminded early and often in the application process that eligibility and vendor issues must be resolved before contract obligation may occur. Escalate unresolved eligibility and vendor issues to appropriate business tool support contacts at local, State, and national levels.

FY 2014 CSP support documents for employees can be found in the CSP SharePoint site. Additional information is also available on the <u>CSP public Web site for employees and partners</u>.

Contact. Refer your questions to the CSP acting team leader, Michael Whitt, at (202) 720-3524.

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